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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on ways to include collaborative learning experiences in reading/writing courses as a method of addressing the demands for improving the communication skills of college students. It includes suggestions drawn from methods used in a college developmental reading class (which can, however, be modified for other types of classes), and focuses on three areas: vocabulary and comprehension study, writing assignments, and test-taking methods. The paper concludes by discussing what an instructor must consider before including collaborative experience in the classroom. (SR)

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Emphasizing Collaborative Experiences in Reading/Writing Courses

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This presentation will focus on ways to include collaborative learning experiences in reading/writing courses as a method of addressing the demands for improving the communication skills of college students. Suggestions will be included in three areas: vocabulary and comprehension study, writing assignments, and test-taking methods.

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Emphasizing Collaborative Experiences in Reading/Writing Courses

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Increasingly employers of college graduates are not only seeking but demanding graduates with strong communication skills including the ability to think, collaborate, and problem solve. Given today's competitive economic environment, which is not likely to decrease in the near future, colleges would do well to heed these needs if they want to attract potential students.

The objective of this presentation is to suggest ways of including collaborative learning experiences in reading/writing courses to enhance thinking and promote problem solving.

The methods that follow have been used in a college developmental reading class, but they could be easily modified for other types of classes. Students form groups early in the course. An ideal number is four which easily allows students to work together in partnerships as well. Reading material has been chosen that lends itself well to discussion. During the fall term 1992, A Basic Reader for College Writers was used. This is a book of short essays covering a wide range of current issues which easily generate opinion and thought. The editors have selected key vocabulary from context and included a variety of comprehension questions. Discussion questions are also included that can be changed and expanded to meet instructional goals.

The vocabulary is reproduced on a worksheet. Working individually students are asked to list any meanings they have for the words and then as a group compare their responses, selecting the best choices for the word in context. This usually promotes multiple meanings and attention to the connotation of the word. Students are encouraged to discuss the context in which the word appears rather than seeking a dictionary meaning immediately. Dictionaries are used primarily to clarify disagreement or when the word is unknown to all members of the group. Students must not only be presented with the opportunity to engage prior knowledge and association in the learning task, but see value given to their efforts. Not all worthwhile information comes from the instructor. Frequently, they are amazed by how much they know about words. Encouraging this leads to greater confidence and persistence, qualities enjoyed by good readers but not so easily attained by those struggling with reading.

Comprehension questions can be negotiated much in the same manner with students initially responding individually. Answers are compared and disagreements discussed. In most instances agreement is reached by analyzing both the reading material and the question. It is important for the instructor to carefully monitor this process, especially with students inexperienced in

group process so that the responses of all are recognized. Analyzing an incorrect answer or a less suitable answer can be just as effective as deciding upon a best answer given a particular situation. In this way students learn the value of proof for their answers and the necessity of listening to each other.

More complex discussion questions can be offered. These present the opportunity to study comparison/contrast, cause and effect and the analysis of multiple viewpoint on a given topic. Students are given advance directions prior to reading which relate to these questions. In the first example listed below students confront ideas from two sources: a general viewpoint shared by many and the specific ideas of one writer in particular. This presents a challenge because the ideas are both contrasted and related in some respects.

Each generation of young Americans has bought into the "American Dream": success in the work place, a good home and community environment, and a happy family life. By hard work they could achieve their goals. Young adults of the 1990's are not so sure they can achieve this dream, but at the very least they believe it will take longer than it did for their parents. LeBoeuf says that many of today's workers no longer believe in the value of hard work.(LeBouef, 231) Compare and contrast the belief in the American Dream with LeBoeuf's ideas in the essay.

In the second example students are asked to compare the ideas of one writer with general information about Japan's economy and production.

The economy and jobs is a central concern in this year's presidential election. One topic included in the debates was a comparison of earnings of top business executives with the average worker. It seems that U.S. executives earn a high percentage of income in relationship to the average worker than top managers in other industrialized countries. Yet it can be argued that the U.S. is falling behind in economic competition. What should be considered in this issue?

Japanese workers generally enjoy job security. Once employed, they often retire from the same company, yet Japan has been one of the top producers in technology. How does this compare with the statement by LeBoeuf which suggests that promising job security is associated with low motivation to work?(LeBouef, 229)

Today's youth have recently been criticized for not only lacking the general information to succeed in an academic setting, but in functioning as an informed citizen in a global society. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., calls this cultural literacy (Hirsh-1987). While this is not new to reading teachers it should be a concern of every teacher. How many avid readers find themselves enrolled in developmental reading courses? How many young people actually listen attentively or regularly to news broadcasts?

By creating collaborative learning environments and linking them to current issues, students see value placed on ideas. Occasionally, the students in this reading class have been overheard discussing these issues before the instructor comes to class. Some have even admitted that they read the newspaper now.

The expectation of a simple answer located on a specific page has dropped. In its place has come the realization that some questions have no ready answers. A consensus of agreement is not always possible; value comes from careful scrutiny of the issue. This can be reinforced by asking students to write their thoughts about a topic before class, then discuss it with others in class, and then write again after listening to the ideas of others.

Sometimes students develop their thoughts into more formal writing. By working in partnership with another member of the group, they evaluate each other's writing and make suggestions for revision. In this way peer review of writing begins with emphasizing the ideas of the writer and then progresses to the finer aspects of writing that include effective introductions, statement of theses, sentence structure and so forth.

Collaborative learning can also be used in some test-taking experiences, ordinarily conducted as a totally individual process. In the example that follows students are given two different viewpoints concerning citizens and firearms. Prior to the test they read and discuss these articles with their group. Points are given for participation and ideas may be recorded. For the test students write individual responses to questions.

ESSAY TEST QUESTION

J. Warren Cassidy, "The Case for Firearms...," Time, 29 Jan. 1990, p. 22.

Sarah Brady, "...And The Case Against Them," Time, 29 Jan. 1990, p. 23.

Comprehension Argument (30 points)
(5 points for participating in group discussion)

1. Trace the argument made by Warren Cassidy for firearms. Analyze and offer criticism for the various points he makes in his argument. (10 points)

2. Trace the argument made by Sarah Brady against firearms. Analyze and offer criticism for various points she makes in her argument. (10 points)

3. Explain your viewpoints on this issue. (5 points)

Another procedure that promotes attention to organization of ideas and good test-taking techniques is to allow students from three to five minutes at the start of the test to analyze short answer essay questions, jotting down pieces of information they wish to include in the answer. They may work individually or with a partner for this task. In this case questions should require organization and extensive review of reading prior to testing. This task promotes supporting a good answer with detail and reduces the fear of forgetting points that enhance an answer. Value is placed on organization and students tend then to give more attention to it.

What must an instructor consider before including collaborative experience in the classroom?

First, examine your instructional goals in relationship to promoting active learning in your students. Are you ready to deal with making some changes? Essentially this involves dealing with the concept that teachers "teach" active learning rather than creating an environment where students "learn" to learn.

Second, examine the structure of your course. Search for those things that will lend themselves to group process, acknowleding that not all learning will occur effectively in this mode.

Third, these tasks require structure and on-going guidance from the instructor. Consider this in the planning. Also it helps to require a definite product: comparison, cause and effect, argument or personal responses.

Fourth, evaluation must be considered. In order to be most effective students need to see that collaborative learning tasks are a legitimate part of the course and grading, instead of drastically reduced in importance to exams.

MacGregor offers these questions: "If multiple small groups are working on problems or exploring issues simultaneously in a classroom, what will be the process for sharing or giving feedback on the results of work? Where and how might the faculty member provide clarification, evaluation or extension of the work that has been accomplished? Will students have an opportunity to evaluate the nature of their own work, as well as their effort as an interdependent group? In what manner will they give the teacher feedback on the quality of the experience? How will the teacher carry out individual student evaluation when students are spending significant time working in teams?"(MacGregor, 1990)

Generating collaborative learning opportunities for students in college courses is not an easy task, but it can positively affect students ability to communicate. You, the teacher may enjoy an additional benefit-for once you have not relegated attention to active learning and communication skills yet again to the back burner of educational choices in deference to the time-honored, traditional and safe presentation of information. Safe?

Probably not. Not according to future employers of these young people. Not unless the future harbors no need of problem-solvers. Consider collaborative learning tasks for your students.

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